Toward a Substantive Theory of the Academic Advising Process: A Grounded Theory

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The role of academic advising in higher education remains largely misunderstood by university stakeholders, faculty and staff, students, and academic advisors. Many hold the simplistic view that academic advising is merely transmitting information to students to ensure timely graduation, a perception that limits what advising can do for student learning, growth, and development. Interviews with NACADA leaders and document analysis reveals a grounded theory of the academic advising process: within the advising context, students connect with caring institutional representatives, make meaning of experiences, and engage in informed decision-making. Synthesizing these experiences helps students develop their academic identity. The theory can aid stakeholders outside of academic advising and give practicing advisors language to explain the valuable work they do with students.

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> "We need to try to find something that holds all these things together."
> (M. Lowenstein, as cited in Burton, 2016, p. 14)

Scholars have identified several obstacles to the professionalization of academic advising: it is often misunderstood, lacks a consistent unifying definition (Himes, 2014; Larson et al., 2018; McGill, 2019; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008), and is practiced in vastly different ways depending on the institution or the student's college/department/major. Studies show how different advising roles can vary within a single campus (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Bridgen, 2017). Contributing to confusion about the nature of academic advising—especially for undergraduates—is the common (mis)perception that advising is primarily about course selection (Bridgen, 2017).

One of the ways in which the ill-defined parameters of the field manifests is through simplistic analogues (such as "advising is teaching"). Although catchy and convenient, the use of these analogues "obscures the uniqueness of academic advising and masks the importance of the scholarship that underlies its practice" (Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008, p. 43). Analogic theories—those that use analogy to inform the work we do—may give us tools to use in our craft (e.g., to argue that academic advising involves teaching), but they do not articulate the defining functions of the field. In asserting that advising is *advising*, Schulenberg and Lindhorst (2008) argued that academic advisors "lack the language needed to describe both the practice of academic advising and its scholarly identity independent of other fields and professions" (p. 44). To arrive at a common understanding of those activities that constitute the work of academic advising and those that do not, we need to clarify the essence and purpose of academic advising. Defining functions—"the structural tenets of a practitioner's work" that "give it focus and form" (Houle, 1980, p. 35)—are essential to guide those working in the field and to communicate to people outside of the profession what we do. This is a larger organizational task, not one that occurs in individual practice. Larson et al. (2018) argued, "an individual or institutional stakeholder should not create a distinct definition of advising according to personal particular needs; such a definition counters growth in the occupation and makes academic advising impossible" (p. 89).

Given these scholarly debates, "much work remains for clarifying theory, philosophy, and approaches of advising" (Burton, 2016, p. 14) and the field "needs a theory that supports its diverse goals and unique position within higher education" (Himes, 2014, p. 13). Despite much deliberation and discourse, academic advising and its role in higher education remains largely misunderstood by university stakeholders, faculty and staff, students, and academic advisors (Bridgen, 2017). Although emerging professions may have alternative or competing ideas about the nature of the work, a primary concern should be "clarifying its defining function(s)" (Houle, 1980, p. 35). Therefore, the purpose of this grounded

theory (Charmaz, 2006; 2014) study is to articulate what occurs during the academic advising process.

Methodology

A grounded theory study offers "a unified theoretical explanation" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 107) of a process grounded in the data and built from categories and dimensions that define that process. It is a useful way to develop theory when no theory exists or when there is little consensus about a process. American sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss developed grounded theory in the 1960s when traditional positivistic methods failed to produce the kind of explanations for the processes they were exploring (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). Specifically, they were interested in generating theory about death and dying from the perspective of patients, something traditional science avoided. Through their observations and interviews with patients and hospital staff, Glaser and Strauss identified common elements about patients hearing progress reports of their health, news of prognoses, and acceptance of their ultimate fates. Through analytic deduction, they developed categories and relationships among categories and built testable theories from qualitative data collection and analysis.

I chose grounded theory as the methodology for this study because I wanted to articulate a *process*. Specifically, I sought to capture the complexity of academic advising work with students and show how our work contributes to their learning (Zarges et al., 2018). Due to the value placed on lived experiences for the participants and the researcher, I relied on Charmaz's (2014) social constructivist grounded theory methods to guide this study, as well as the empirically derived definition of academic advising provided by Larson et al. (2018). Three parts of their definition—"Navigate," "Successful," and "Academic Interactions"—implicitly reference a *process* at work. With *navigate*, the authors suggest advising is "purposeful, with direction, and *goal-oriented*" (p. 88). *Successful* is a "term reinforc[ing] the aim of a productive *interaction* [emphasis added] that achieves a purpose" (p. 88). *Academic interactions* refer to "a human-centered *activity* [emphasis added]" revolving "around the academic interactions of students and campus and community members within the world of higher education" (p. 89). The current study adds nuance to the dimensions of their definition by exploring the *process* of academic advising implicit within their definition.

Procedure

The findings that create a grounded theory for academic advising emerged from the analysis of two types of data: interviews and documents. Both types of data are described herein.

Interviews and Sample

The 17 participants were all professionals working in the field. All had graduate degrees (many had doctorates) and served in a variety of advising positions and roles within each of NACADA's three organizational divisions: administrative (e.g., standing committees), regional (concerned with the regional organization of the association), and advising communities (groups organized around topics of advising administration, specific populations, differing institutional types, and the theory, practice, and delivery of advising).

The final sample consisted of advising community chairs ($n = 5$), published subject-matter experts ($n = 9$), and leaders in high office ($n = 10$). Some participants fell into two groups. Table 1 outlines participants by their current positions; number of years in higher education, in academic advising, and in NACADA; highest degree earned; and the way they became part of the sample (i.e., as a community chair, subject matter expert, or office holder).

To select participants, two types of sampling were used. Grounded theory studies begin with criterion sampling in which "cases that meet some criterion" (Patton, 2002, p. 243) are used. Due to their focus on examining "the theoretical, philosophical and historical foundations of academic advising" and interest in "supporting theory building initiatives and their applications" (NACADA, 2013), the first six participants were current and past chairs of the Theory, Philosophy, & History of Advising Community (with the exception of one who was never formally a chair but instrumental in the group's creation).

While these first six interviews were conducted, transcripts were analyzed for emerging patterns and ideas. During this *initial coding* stage (Charmaz, 2006), I inductively coded word-by-word and line-by-line, tagging meaningful words or phrases while writing memos of initial impressions. The initial emphasis of this project was on the *professionalization* of academic advising, but the problem of defining the field's

Table 1. Participant profiles

No.	Current Position	NACADA (Years)	Higher Ed (Years)	Degree	Advising (Years)	Past Roles	CC	SME	Office
1	PA	12	15	PhD	15	FA; PA; AA	X	X	
2	UA	15	18	PhD	14	PA	X	X	X
3	AA	13	17	MA, MEd	15	PA; AA	X	X	
4	UA, FA	25	45	PhD	15	FA		X	
5	AA	23	40	PhD	40	PA; AA	X	X	
6	FA	15	19	PhD	19	FA; PA; AA	X	X	
7	AA	25	31	EdD	31	FA; AA		X	X
8	FA	11	36	PhD	30	FA		X	
9	AA	17	22	PhD	18	PA; AA			X
10	FA	12	17	PhD	15	PA; FA			X
11	UA	21	24	PhD	24	FA; AA		X	
12	AA	18	18	MS	18	AA			X
13	UA	22	26	PhD	26	PA; AA			X
14	AA	21	32	EdD	23	PA; AA			X
15	AA	27	27	EdD	27	PA; FA; AA			X
16	AA	32	40	PhD	30	AA			X
17	UA	19	42	PhD	42	FA; AA			X
						Total	5	9	10

Note. AA = academic administrator; CC = NACADA community chair; FA = faculty advisor; Office = NACADA high office; PA = primary-role advisor; SME = subject matter expert; UA = university administrator

parameters began to emerge as a substantial issue. Therefore, the direction of the project began to shift. Given this emerging direction, a second type of sampling became necessary. Theoretical sampling is "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses [their] data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop [their] theory as it emerges" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 p. 45). Whereas initial/criterion sampling "gets you started, theoretical sampling guides where you go" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 198). In this second stage of analysis—focused coding—the researcher selects concepts found in the open coding stage to focus on and develop. Throughout this entire process, new data are constantly compared to existing data in order to make meaning of their relationships. This type of analysis, *the constant comparative method* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), is a key feature of grounded theory.

During the initial interviews, participants referenced published literature and the important thinkers in the field, which led me to involve two more groups of participants: published subject matter experts in the field (who pursue ideas posed in their scholarship) and those in high office within the NACADA organization (those who consult with academic advising programs globally). Adding participants from these groups captured two distinct vantage points: theoretical/empirical (scholars) and practice-based (high officers). As interviews continued, I fleshed out emerging concepts through memo-writing and by theorizing potential relationships between concepts. As the analysis evolves, the researcher discovers important properties and/or subcategories of larger concepts. Theoretical sampling, therefore, is an important tool to "maximize opportunities to develop concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions, uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 143).

An interview protocol was designed based on Knox and Fleming's (2010) analysis of the field of adult education (vis-à-vis Houle, 1980). Questions would address the distinctive nature of academic advising as a field, the various roles performed by advisors, the career stages of advisors, the role of scholarly literature and graduate curricula in advancing the field, and perceptions about other advising stakeholders. These interview questions were reviewed by my

Table 2. Email chains analyzed

Title of Email Thread	Date of Original Post	Number of Responses	Number of Participants
"The Value of Academic Advising"	October 15, 2012	45	29
"After the Corporate University. . .Now What?"	December 5, 2012	6	6
"A Theory on the Purpose of Academic Advising"	December 6, 2010	16	10
"Conferences ours and others"	September 21, 2013	29	15
"Customer Service—A Dissenting Opinion"	March 18, 2014	24	18

major professor, dissertation committee, and doctoral student peers.

The semi-structured interviews ranged from 74-147 minutes and were recorded on two devices. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face and the remainder via phone. All questions in the interview protocol were asked, but the order of the questions was dictated by the flow of the conversation. On occasion, I asked follow-up questions not included on the protocol to garner more information on an interesting nuance mentioned by participants. Field notes were minimal so I could focus attention on the participant; I reflected on the interviews immediately after conducting them. Transcribed data were sent to participants to verify accuracy. When all the interview data had been analyzed, I related codes and properties together, "refining the category scheme" (Merriam, 2009, p. 200), which created a preliminary theory of the defining functions of the academic advising process.

Document Analysis

In addition to interviews, data for grounded theory can come from observations or documents. Using extant documents is a way for researchers "to support their observational or interview findings" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 48). When data can be corroborated, there is more trustworthiness for the findings (Bowen, 2009).

I returned to the Theory, Philosophy, & History of Advising Community, one of NACADA's 40 advising communities. Since the group's formation in 2000, there has been an active listserv in which participants debate and engage in the meaning and practice of academic advising. The process represents a form of discriminant sampling (Creswell, 2013) in which the researcher goes outside of the initial sample to see if the theory holds up. It also represents a form of data triangulation (Denzin, 2012) in which multiple forms of data give the findings a broader basis for support. Five email chains were relevant to this investigation and therefore selected for analysis. See Table 2.

Although listservs were treated as non-human subject research, it was important to anonymize the participants' names. The chains were numbered 1-5, and responders were assigned numbers within each of those chains. The selected email threads were coded through the constant comparative method to further test the tentatively articulated theory. The analysis of the chains added nuance and extended the existing categories but did not add new categories, suggesting that data saturation had been reached. After analyzing these data, I revisited interview data to ensure that the categories represented the whole scope of the process.

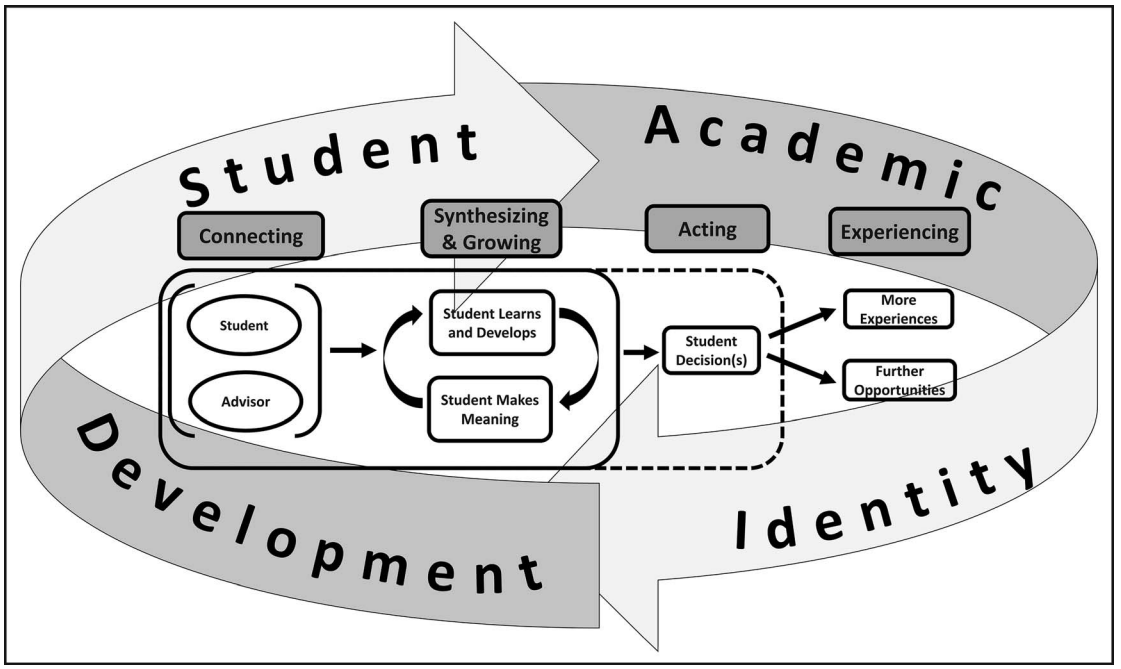
Member Checking and Refining the Theory

After developing the theory through these two analytical phases, interview participants were again given the opportunity to confirm meaningfulness of the categories, their relationship to each other, and the theory as a whole. Some simply agreed with the categories while others reflected and provided substantive commentary. Upon receiving feedback, categories and their dimensions were revisited and further refined. Feedback from the peer review publication process and conversations with colleagues (*all is data*) have also aided in refining the components presented herein.

Findings

Substantive theory—"theory that applies to a specific aspect of practice" (Merriam, 2009, p. 200)—is the outcome of a grounded theory study. A theory is important because it "consists of very general ideas in any discipline that serve as foundations, or in some cases explanations for more particular facts and ideas and which guide inquiry in that discipline" (Lowenstein, 2014, para.

Figure 1. Substantive theory of the academic advising process



5). Figure 1 displays the process of academic advising that unfolded in this study.

This model consists of four semi-linear stages (which repeat), expressed as gerunds to indicate they are part of a *process* (Charmaz, 2006). This process, like most, is cyclical and recurring. First, the student connects with a caring institutional representative (*Connecting*) and after establishing rapport, the student and the advisor can synthesize experiences (*Synthesizing & Growing*). The student has the opportunity to learn and develop and make meaning of their educational and cocurricular experiences. The advising context, indicated by a solid rounded box, provides a space for the student to begin engaging in informed decision-making. The decision-making process (*Acting*) can occur within the advising context or outside as a consequence of academic advising, as indicated with a dotted extension to the advising context. This process should lead the student to more experiences and further opportunities that they otherwise might not know to seek out (*Experiencing*). The process repeats when the student revisits their advisor. Taken together, the result is the formulation of a student's academic identity (*Student Academic Identity Development*).

Connecting

Advising was described as a unique place of *connection* for an advisor and student: an interactive endeavor, not one in which the student is the passive recipient of information.

> The strength of our profession lies in the heart of what happens in that interaction. A student can go on a computer, look up information and think about where they're going or what matters to them or what class might be interesting or might not be interesting. It's when that exchange happens between this knowledgeable person who's truly invested in that student's success. That's what academic advising is…And yet, we haven't quite grasped that *process*. (Interviewee 13)

The one-on-one dialectical connection between advisor and student fosters learning within academic advising (Zarges et al., 2018). Even if students come in for simple matters, if the student is meeting with a concerned representative who is trained to look beneath the surface, deeper issues will likely come up. Participants argued that some information students need could be found online and advisors should be more than "living and

breathing FAQ documents" (Interviewee 3). In fact, Interviewee 3 suggested:

> The real heart of advising rests in these discussions about substantive issues. I don't want to suggest that the 'details' are not part of the work of advising, but they are fairly easily recognizable as part of the work of advising and at the same time don't seem to tell us exhaustively what advising should really involve.

To serve students in these ways, academic advisors must wear many hats to be able to read and interpret both the issues students are presenting *and* those that are beneath the surface. This process is an artform of integration:

> The ability to integrate the theoretical understanding of what is happening, the conceptual and cognitive understanding of your job with the human interaction. It's simultaneously seeing the student in front of you, meeting them where they are, integrating your responsibility as a professional, and your institutional mission, to marshal these intangible intangibles. I operationalize that very practically, even though 'artform' sounds like something that you can't define. Those are measurable competencies that are built over time. (Interviewee 9)

Academic advisors must be able to integrate many skills on the spot and have a broad and in-depth understanding of the campus and the institution's curriculum. Students arrive with different needs: "some of these questions are simply curricular, some are really intellectual, some are truly developmental" (Interviewee 8). One interviewee likened the advising interaction to a close reading of a text: "It's more complicated than just graduation rates and retention rates. It's being able to interpret a text well; to understand the student before us. To honor them, revere them, and respect them" (Interviewee 5).

Finally, participants argued that one of the primary missions of academic advising is to support students, sometimes advocating on their behalf. One referred to the Greek term, Paraclete ("one who is called alongside to help") to describe the actions of advisors:

> When my students are not in good academic standing or violating university policy, they need somebody who can help them stand up for themselves and sometimes they've done wrong and they need to take their medicine, but somebody needs to stand for them. (Interviewee 8)

In the current climate of retention and focus on graduation, advocating may be the most important responsibility of the advisor.

Synthesizing and Growing

Students build a rapport with advisors in this space of *connection*. Two sub-processes within advising are outlined below: students learn and develop and make meaning. These sub-processes are not hierarchical; they occur in tandem.

Students Learn and Develop

Within academic advising, students learn and develop. Therefore, academic advisors must discuss intellectual goals with students and facilitate student learning and development (Zarges et al., 2018): "It is work that enhances learning and is a locus of learning. It is the place where people learn, not just a service, not even a service that tells you where to go learn" (Interviewee 3). To fulfill this function, advisors should help students to understand "how to improve their intellectual development (which might . . . involve considerations of emotional and other aspects of development)" (Chain 1, Responder 10).

Advisors also facilitate personal development by helping students learn to appreciate ambiguity and develop critical thinking skills. To take seriously the role of facilitating personal growth and development, academic advisors must meet the different needs of each student. This involves meeting students where they are and providing the scaffolding they need in that moment. "Some will need to be educated on policy, some on requirements; some will require assistance in learning to manage their time, and some will need assistance developing decision-making skills" (Chain 5, Responder 8). Through a balance of challenge and support (Sanford, 1962), academic advisors have a responsibility to help students become their best selves. Encouraging a student's growth is helping them become engaged citizens.

Academic advising goes beyond transactional activities such as disseminating information and

making referrals. Participants argued that although reaching graduation might be an aspect of academic advising, it should not be the primary goal. In thinking about advising as an endeavor through which students learn and develop, Interviewee 5 asserted,

> . . . what good is it going to do a person to understand the graduation requirements later in life? That learning outcome has a short half-life. We know there is more, that it's not all that simple. And to hear a colleague say, 'well it's just about graduating people,'. . . we know it's not.

Several participants brought up the example of an advisor who sees that a student—due to personal circumstances—would be better served by leaving the institution. There are times when academic advisors must go against institutional imperatives to meet the needs of students and this reality relates to the importance of advocating for students when necessary.

Additionally, as professionals with advanced education, academic advisors should model higher ways of thinking for students. Although it was widely agreed that academic advising should be primarily about the learning and development of students, some questioned if primary-role academic advisors had the time or expertise to teach students in a manner comparable to faculty. In the case of advising performed by primary-role advisors, this responsibility can be challenging, as primary-role academic advisors may not have graduate training in the field for which they advise: "We're only academic advisors, not academics" (Chain 1, Responder 10).

Participants suggested that to claim to be an educative function, academic advising needed to have clear learning outcomes that could be assessed. One email responder suggested four types of knowledge and/or skills students should acquire through advising: facts/information, technical/discipline-based skills, transferrable skills, and habits of mind.

Students Make Meaning

In academic advising, students have an opportunity to synthesize their learning and make meaning of their experiences. In a judgment-free, one-to-one setting, academic advisors help students determine their values and take stock of their situation: "An advisor's job is to train you as a human being, to figure out what is important to you, and to help you create the education that's meaningful to you and important to your life . . . to guide and shape the student's academic experience in the institution" (Interviewee 3). Participant 1 offered this example: "I often talk to students about the difference between their own intrinsic motivations and their motivations to meet extrinsic expectations, particularly from their parents. Who else is going to ask them those questions?"

Academic advisors facilitate conversations about connections between academic programs, careers, and values. For example, with an engineering student, it may be the advisor—rather than the calculus instructor—who helps the student understand the importance of the course in relation to the rest of the curriculum. Beyond learning skills such as goal setting, "the learning that advising brings about is integrative and synthetic learning and its job is to help students make meaning out of their education taken as a whole" (Interviewee 3). Advisors help students "to reflect on their education and to see how things fit together. Compare the different courses they are taking and see how the different disciplines they are studying inform each other. That's the most exciting work that advisors do" (Interviewee 3).

Academic advisors also help students make connections to their life's larger purpose: "It's one of the few places in higher education that students are asked to think about *why* they're there. Why they want to study some major? What is their passion?" (Interviewee 7). Participants spoke about the need for academic advising to be a transformative experience whereby students are *changed*. In their view, this distinguished academic advising from other units on campus. "When students go to financial aid or the registrar, that student is going to get a service. But when advisors work with students, our ultimate goal is to *transform* that student's beliefs, practices, behaviors, in a way that benefits the educational goals of the institution and the student" (Interviewee 3). Advisors are primed "to help today's students make sense of what, how, and why they are studying" (Chain 1, Responder 10). They have a responsibility to "help students understand the reasons that higher education exists (not merely, what a degree can do for the student)" (Chain 3, Responder 5). Although there are opportunities in classes and

extracurricular activities for students to make meaning of their experiences, it is within the advising setting "where that synthesis can happen" (Interviewee 1).

Acting

One consequence of academic advising is that students can begin to engage in informed decision-making. In encouraging students to understand their curricular decisions, academic advisors help students to craft their education. Through academic advising, students articulate, develop, and accomplish goals. They learn to make decisions that make the most sense for them:

> The essence of academic advising is meeting a student and connecting in a place where they are making significant life decisions. And academic pathways reflect these decisions, which tie into their identity, and academic advising is connecting that place of honesty and truth where the student allows the advisor to provide whatever is needed in that moment to help things become clearer for that student. And that can take on a lot of different dimensions. It can be different expressions of that same thing, or different student needs being met in that *moment of connection*. (Interviewee 13)

An advisor's contribution to the decision-making process is critical in distinguishing it from other roles on campus. One participant, a faculty advisor, had studied the history of academic advising in great depth. His primary observation about distinguishing academic advising from other professions was its role in decision-making:

> The one thing that's common all the way through [the history of advising] is helping people make decisions, and the question of decisions about *what* have multiplied over the years … it's caused the advisor role to keep being reinvented because people have to make decisions … helping people make good decisions has to do with content—decisions about *what*—and gauging the student's self-awareness and self-understanding to make decisions: "am I really aware of myself, of my future, and aware of some of the consequences and some of the decisions I'm thinking about making." That involves an exploration of the person and how much the person has explored themselves. The distinctive thing is I'm called alongside to help people make choices, and I need to find out a lot about them and a lot about the information going into those choices. (Interviewee 8)

Advisors therefore play a critical role in supporting the development of a student's decision-making process, which can occur within the advising context or as a consequence of advising. Either way, thinking through options and decisions will lead students to more experiences and opportunities.

Experiencing

Partially due to the decisions that students make from the advising process, they will have more experiences and further opportunities. Participants described the role of academic advisors as guiding students' academic and extracurricular pursuits, helping them see opportunities they might otherwise miss, and encouraging them to become them engaged on campus.

There is far less to explain about this portion of the model since, on the one hand, it involves every experience the student will have outside of the advising office. On the other hand, it also represents every experience and opportunity the student could possibly debrief with their academic advisor. Through the advising process, students connect with a caring institutional representative to synthesize and make meaning of their experiences, which empowers and enlightens them to make important decisions about their education and their lives. Processing these experiences and opportunities—if they are truly engaged—can lead students to consider their academic identity.

Student Academic Identity Development

Ideally, the culmination of the academic advising process will be a student's academic identity development: the reciprocal relationship a student has between their major with the rest of their self-identity. How does a student's choice of major shape who they are, and how does who they wish to become impact their choice of major? How do unexpected learning experiences shift a student's life plan? For the student, identity construction can emerge by synthesizing learning

experiences in the classroom and through engagement on campus with their academic advisor.

In helping students craft an academic identity, participants emphasized the word *academic* over *advising* (White, 2015): advising consists of teaching students and facilitating their growth "as opposed to telling students what to do" (Interviewee 11). An emphasis on creating an academic identity makes academic advising unique: Every person might benefit from some guidance dealing with the transition to adulthood, but "not everybody needs help interrelating academic disciplines to each other, planning an education and making sense out of the relationship between courses and why we take things in a certain order and how to choose intellectual directions" (Interviewee 3). Put another way, "We help [students] attain, for themselves, an education worth having for a lifetime. That's not something any idiot with a college bulletin can do. That's not about graduating on time. It's not about retention either" (Interviewee 5).

As with any identity construction process, academic identity is ongoing and iterative. Ideally, a student meets with an advisor several times over the course of their undergraduate career. During this timeframe, students will experience significant change and growth. It is incumbent on academic advisors to recognize these changes:

> After two or three years, the student is a different person; they've really grown, and so I'm not talking to the same person that I was talking to two years ago. I need to talk with them differently, because they are a different person. (Interviewee 8)

By assisting students in learning and development, meaning-making, and in making decisions that greatly impact their lives, advisors endeavor to lead students to form their academic identity. This process shapes what students do and who they become as the result of their college experiences.

Discussion and Implications

This model calls for a hermeneutic understanding of the academic advising process (Champlin-Scharff, 2010). In constructing their academic identity, students are constantly interpreting their world and the events and decisions that shape their world. Academic advisors, in turn, are interpreting their students' narratives (Hagen, 2018) as they connect and build rapport with them, facilitate their learning, development, and meaning-making, and aid in their decision-making processes.

The components of this theory represent significant learning opportunities for students within the advising context. For academic advising to reach its potential as outlined here, students must be open to the process and academic advisors must approach their work in earnest, as a complicated process that demands their attention, energy, and expertise. If the advising experience—alongside all other college experiences—is successful, students will become different people. Yet, much of the discussions in our field center around what advising *ought* to be rather than what it *is* (Burton, 2016; McGill et al., 2020). If academic advising is an educational endeavor, what do we want students to learn from the academic advising process?

To advance the practice and scholarship of academic advising, "educational goals and purposes need to be extended beyond acquiring knowledge to include the development of individual students' capacities for personal empowerment as autonomous intellectual agents" (White, 2015, p. 271). Establishing educational outcomes of academic advising and then assessing whether those outcomes were met is critical to demonstrating the learning that occurs within advising (Aiken-Wisniewski, 2010; Zarges et al., 2018). But what are we assessing if we do not operate within a universally agreed-upon framework to guide what we are doing? If most of our assessment efforts are tied to institution-specific prerogatives and not to a higher organizational framework, what are the implications of the professional status of the field? Advisees are generally not held responsible (i.e., evaluated) for the learning gained in an advising setting, so how will we know what they have learned? The field of academic advising is in a unique position to measure student learning in a variety of ways (White, 2015), and outlining the process of academic advising provides a framework for thinking of assessment of student learning through each phase of their experience. In fact, thinking about student learning through student learning outcomes highlights "the advising relationship and the nature of the learning process and affords opportunities to ensure that the defined learning outcomes are met while allowing, when necessary, adjustments to the advising practice" (White, 2015, p. 273).

A primary contribution made by this study is to suggest how academic advisors and the advising process itself plays a role in increasing the self-efficacy of students' decision-making and the formation of their academic identity. There is ample literature to support the role of advisors in helping students to make decisions. Indeed, a search of "decision-making" in the *NACADA Journal* yielded 264 results. It is interesting, then, that scant literature in discussing the purpose and function of advising explicitly notes decision-making as a key outcome. The literature to date has also not explicitly identified the role of academic advising in the formation of a student's academic identity. A search of the *NACADA Journal* for "academic identity" only yielded three articles. The development of a student's academic identity is perhaps the most important outcome of a college experience. Although a definition of academic identity is broadly defined and elusive, Was and Isaacson (2008) developed an instrument to measure a student's academic identity development along ten topics: choosing a college, reasons for college, classroom attention, priorities, academic goals, interest and motivation, discipline, volition, responding to failure, and persistence in the face of failure. Students who develop a strong sense of academic identity are more likely to participate in activities that promote academic success instead of academic failure (Chorba et al., 2012). Academic advisors are clearly in a position to impact a student's development in all ten of these areas. However, without identifying a student's academic identity development as a key goal of academic advising, there are missed opportunities.

If the primary goal of academic advising is to help students to achieve an academic identity, what are the institutional policy imperatives? These findings align with White's (2015) proposition that:

> The ultimate goal of a fully functioning academic advising program is to engage students as scholars, thus transforming the student experience. Academic advisers work with students to enable them to be confident and assertive in their own abilities to learn, generate, and apply new knowledge and to empower them. (p. 272)

But despite an advisor's best efforts in treating academic advising seriously, this level of attention and student support can only be done with *institutional support*: if institutions care about the learning and development that comes about through academic advising, they must put resources into making it stronger. In his case study applying systems theory to investigate how the purpose of academic advising is understood and practiced on one particular campus, Bridgen (2017) noted that there may always be a disconnect: academic advising is practiced within a *system* of higher education where the goals of upper-level administration may not align with the deeper educative goals of the academic advising community. How can the academic advising community communicate the value and complexity of their work in a way that captures the attention of important stakeholders? To avoid the circuitous processes of constantly re-inventing retention plans in response to metrics-demands, institutions must consider what they hope to achieve from their academic advising programs (McFarlane, 2018). If campuses choose quick-fix technological solutions focused on metric-improvement without considering their students' needs, they may be missing the bigger picture. Thus, institutions should ask two questions: "What is it that students deserve through their interactions with academic advising? What do students most need and desire through their interactions with academic advising, and how do we make sure that happens?" (McFarlane, 2018, para. 6).

Advancing the profession involves not only problematizing simplistic views and practices of academic advising, but also thinking more intentionally about its distinctive purpose and essence (Larson et al., 2018). This substantive theory aims to clarify existing (mis)understandings of academic advising and to problematize over-simplistic notions about what advising aims to do. In proposing a substantive theory of academic advising, this paper adds to the disparate ideas proposed in the literature and builds a new framework with subtle dimensions about what occurs within academic advising and as the result of it. The theory is not only intended for stakeholders outside of academic advising, but also for practicing academic advisors. The study gives practitioners language to talk about our work with students and its value (Larson et al., 2018): academic advising provides students a place in which to connect with a caring institutional representative, learn and develop, make meaning of their educational and cocurricular experiences, and engage in informed decision-making. Synthesizing these experiences forms a basis for students to develop their academic identity.

As "any conclusions developed by grounded theorists are suggestive, incomplete, and inconclusive" (Creswell, 2013, p. 88), there are limitations to this study and in areas for future research. Like most qualitative research, the findings represent a small group—in this case, of NACADA leadership—and therefore, are not representative of the feelings of the entire field. Because of their roles in the association and time in the field (all interviewees had more than a decade of academic advising experience), the participants think intentionally about overarching issues and the meaning of their work. Additionally, this work has been built mostly on the premise of undergraduate academic advising in a North American context. Would this process look different in different academic or national contexts? Is a universally agreed upon process of advising possible or even desirable? (Burton, 2016). Researchers might engage in similar questions with a larger pool and with participants who do not necessarily represent NACADA leadership.

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